

The Affect of Children with their Vulnerable Attitudes and Innocence are Delineated in Anita Rau Badami's Tell it to the Trees

G.Hemalatha

Assistant Professor of English, Dr. N.G.P. Arts and Science College (Autonomous) Kalapatti Road, Coimbatore, India

Abstract

Anita Rau Badami's fourth novel *Tell It to the Trees* projects many suspenseful events of thirteen year old Varsha Dharma. It focuses on the impact of family secrets. As a suspenseful event, the novel revolves around the various perspective of the character Varsha Dharma. All the main actions represented through the children characters and describe how the novel deals with trauma, intrigue, and complex relationship. The story centers on the Indian family. The novel expresses many issues including child's felony. This paper mainly emphasizes on the hard threatening of children through psychological trauma, complexity in relationship, innocent attitude.

KEYWORDS: child's felony, relationship, innocence, stream of consciousness.

Anita Rau Badami is one of the distinguished writers in the effervescent field of Indian sub continental literature. Badami was born in the town of Rourkela, in the year 1961 particularly in the eastern state of Orissa in India. Since 1991 Badami lived in Canada and had been a former journalist. Badami's father worked as a mechanical engineer on the railroads. Only due to her father's job, Badami's family got shifted every two to three years. Badami develops her passion for reading and writing from her childhood because she nurtured by stories by her extended family. She attended Catholic schools in India. Badami acquired a Bachelor's Degree in English at the University of Madras and studied journalism in Sophia College in Bombay. Badami has possessed versatile personality, as an accomplished novelist, confident story teller; copy writer, journalist, short story fictionist in anthologies and literary magazines. Badami wrote many stories for children's magazines and got married in 1984. Badami acquired her reputation due to her well known novel *Tamarind Mem* (1996) it had acknowledged critical acclaim too. Badami has won the Commonwealth Best Booker Prize in the Canada/Caribbean region for her second novel *The Hero's Walk* (2001). Her third novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) and her fourth novel *Tell It to the Trees* (2011).

Tell It to the Trees deals with the children throughout the novel it highlights Badami's contribution towards the affect of children and exactly presented their vulnerable attitudes and innocence. Edna St. Vincent Millay says that "Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age. The child is grown, and puts away childish things. Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies." This novel has written in a form of epistolary which refers various characters with exact date and month and beautifully applied technique of flash back to arouse inquisitiveness. It opens with a secret; it is witnessed on one morning a dead body found in freezing winter. Though it was not noticed by the people, ravens created the evidence by its pecking. Actually it is not too far from the house of Dharma family. It arouses various interests into the

minds of readers in order to know the factual incidents related to the past. It is the body of Anu Krishnan. Through the present the novel takes the readers to the past and carries the readers into another world. Here Badami skillfully applies a stream of conscious technique. It proves her literary genius in her writings. *Tell It to the Trees* is presented in an epistolary style and has four different parts.

Varsha is a protagonist of the novel, she is almost fourteen. She loves reading, family and develops diverse thoughts over her ambition. Varsha Dharma is a granddaughter of Mr.J.K. Dharma late, and his wife Bhagirathi familiarly known as Akka, throughout the novel. Varsha is a daughter of Vikram and Harini or Helen and her fate drags her to be a step daughter to Suman and also to be a lovable sister to Hemant. Varsha's step mother, Suman asked several time since the discovery of the body. "Didn't she know how dangerous cold can be? Hanh? Do you know why she did such a thing?" (10). Varsha almost feels sorry for her and nods her head and said that "We were asleep, Mama, she said politely again that I have no idea why Anu had to go out. If I was awake maybe I could have stopped her." (10) At that time behind Varsha Hem pushes himself very closer to her and she too hugged him hard. Hemant is Varsha's half brother; he is a son of Suman but entirely belongs to Varsha. Varsha loves Hem more than anything and anybody more than air, water and food and little higher than her Papa (Vikram).

They both develop their strong relationship and it makes them to hide few secrets from others. Sometimes people may feel hard to keep the secret and it is the same with Varsha and Hem. They find Akka, a grandmother to tell their secrets and grandma told them strictly not to vomit their secrets to her, because she is very old to listen and she may feel hard and her spirit find no peace after listening to those secrets. It may drive her mad so she refuses to listen to it. Akka's best advice to them is "Go tell to the trees", and "They won't tell a soul." (19) She assures that trees will never tell your secrets to anybody. These kids started believing it and practiced the same throughout their life when they feel it hard. Here it is good to observe the recurrence of Badami, and how she skillfully painted the images of trees with the blamelessness of children and it is more appropriate towards the title *Tell it to the Trees*. It resembles like open-secret. It indirectly preaches one to the etiquettes, that people should not hunt for other's secrets if they do they may be driven mad throughout their live and live with no peace and find some hardness in them.

Nearly three generations forced to live in a small house which was built by Varsha's grandfather, the town called Merrit's point. Dharma's family proves the typical Indian life style by their living. Papa told Varsha to forget her mother Helen absolutely and never allows her to talk about Helen. Papa expected Helen to be a traditional wife and to be lived within in the portfolio of the family. Papa's thoughts deeply emphasis the cultural bond and it makes him insist Varsha that Helen as a traitor and had abandoned them. This irritation shifted from her father to Varsha. It makes her to use such statements "I'd push her away. Not needed here she is not. Go away monster mother, leave us alone, I'd yell, we've found somebody else to love a new mother who will always be here for as long as ever." (30)

Varsha's first disappointment and psychological affect towards her mother Helen alerts her mind to have a strong hold and suspicion over Suman. Though Suman is a step-mother to Varsha, She is not ready to lose her in life. Even though Suman had not known Anu she developed a thought that Anu could become a good friend to her. Vikram, Varsha's dad and Suman's husband never liked Anu.

Suman thinks often that Vikram wished, he had not rented Anu for a complete year and now Anu is dead. Suman had a good company with Anu, but now she lost her and often stuck with her sweet memories of exchanging food.

When Anu was alive, as a writer, she seeks her seclude to move back from the city. She finds Dharmas' back-house in the town of Merrit's Point is more calm and comfortable to begin her writing. It was her ultimate speck to acquire a year off and again to begin her writing. She had found the rental house of Dharma with a happy coincidence. A friend from university sent the list to Anu, the one who keeps track on everyone particularly in her batch. It includes the quiet and reserved Vikram Dharma and his first wife, Helen. So Anu's job is to intimate about Dharma's family to the university friend. She hazily recalled Vikram but she had a strong memory over Helen, a beautiful, amiable, social and cheerful woman.

Anu realized practically that Vikram has a new wife. After Helen was killed in a car accident a hasty marriage arranged in India between Vikram and Suman. Suman Dharma has an absolute difference to Helen, due to her quiet and timid quality. She moved from India loaded with full of the promises and responsibilities of her new life which she started in Canada. A new home, a new country and a daughter, Varsha from Vikram's first marriage waited for Suman. Vikram has suspicious attitude, control and outburst of angry. These storms have become a daily custom in Suman's life and lead her to live with no peace. It makes Suman to resign towards her ruined future and feel burdened life after her marriage between fear and despair.

Varsha recalls some incidents when she was four years old, Akka was ill at that time Papa had taken her to the hospital in Vancouver, Varsha was in the car with her mom Helen, She has no idea where they were going. She expected hot chocolate or a movie; everything is easily attainable with her mom. Helen seems tensed with excitement this is very transparent to Varsha. Varsha asked her mom whom you really want to meet. Helen replies to Varsha by stating the stranger as a friend and said it is something important to have a discussion with him even a daughter is not allowed. Helen stepped inside the stranger's house and Varsha supposed to be inside a car. After a very long time, Varsha feels thirsty and likes to get into the stranger's house where her mother went.

Suddenly Helen crossed and said here is some water and asked not to behave like a baby and shut the door. Actually Varsha waited in a car nearly an hour, but Helen argued her, it was only twenty minutes. Though Varsha loses her patience and boost ups her angry she thinks about her Papa who expects them to be in a house on time. Helen would always get home before Papa reaches home. So Vikram would not know certain things about Helen. Varsha is not sure why Papa always so angry with her. The actual reason behind Vikram's angry is Varsha was taken by her mother when Helen got an attack of theroaming. Varsha has to keep up many promises between her and Helen. As a mother Helen finds easy to convince her daughter Varsha. Sometimes Helen said "she would bought these things cheap at the second-hand store in the next town or if it too expensive, like with a pair of old and intricate earrings, she said she'd inherited it from her great grandmother." (45) Varsha knows her mother was lying. Through Helen's attitude Badami mirrors out the life of failure, due to her unfaithfulness and also for not accepting the familial responsibilities. Even her motherly love is not viewed seriously towards her daughter Varsha. So God

makes her life and soul empty through accident and death. It entirely affected Varsha's life so much and it makes her demands love and affection from a new step mother.

Varsha and Vikram long for a love after the arrival of Suman, who holds the position of step-mother to Varsha. Suman is isolated both by the landscape and the culture. Suman knows well that neither romance nor passion involved in Vikram's decision in addition to his marriage. As per Anu's observations, Suman has various characteristics such as good-natured, easygoing, the perfect substitute for a wild dead wife, a patient nursemaid for his aged mother, a caring mother for his step child. Suman helps her mother-in-law in the backyard, where they grew bell peppers, egg plants, tomatoes, beans, zucchini, potatoes, pumpkins etc, to prevent it and carefully handles it. These things are not only visible to Vikram but also to the readers. It is apt to recall Madu Kaki's words to Suman that "Your husband will take care of you like your father did, so naturally you have to love him for it." (50) Women are culturally bounded and they cannot think out of it throughout their life. Even the society expects the same from all women in general. Badami aptly exhibited Suman's character traditionally through her accepted responsibilities in her family and also in her life.

Suman's first baby died because he was born prematurely and names him for Spring. It is a favourite season to Suman and Varsha names him as Vasant. Suman's second baby is Hemant, Varsha threatens Hem in a sensitive way that she could see him, and these words make Hem creepy and to cry. Hem asks: "Really? Really truly? You can see ghosts? ". Varsha replies "Yes, yes, I can. I can see my dead mom and grandpa and our baby brother. I tell him if he doesn't listen to me and obey me and love me always, I will call the ghosts to take him away to the other side of our gate where they all live. Or bottom of the lake." (58) An innocent Hem believes Varsha's words which make Hem to follow whatever Varsha really says and plans. Hemant repeated once to Anu that "Yes, it's our place. This is our tree. You can't come here. You can't touch our tree". Varsha's hatred towards Anu made Hem to exhibit the same. Hem and Varsha seem to be one brain in two bodies. Badami projects the real sense of belongingness are highly witnessed through children and their discomforts feel towards stranger exhibited differently and distantly.

One of the incidents made Hem to hate Vikram his Papa, Hem said that he hates Papa, because he hurt Mama". Varsha replies that she didn't hurt her, Mama hurt herself, didn't you hear? She tripped over her slippers and fell down the stairs. Hem is for sure and replies no Mama did not and said Papa pushed her out of the room, even they too saw it." Varsha nodded her head again and said yes "we saw it." but Papa didn't push her and insist strongly not to mention it to anyone. If he is not ready to do so Varsha threatens hem that she will call the ghosts to punish him. Varsha says even though Papa does silly he loves them and wants only what is good for them. Varsha thought Hem was a baby so he needed to be taught how to keep secrets. Family secrets. "Our family, our secrets. Nobody else had to know" (33) Dharma's family expects their own dignity lies on their family name, so it is more important for them to maintain ever, even though it finds contrast in the familial life.

Suman's isolation get transformed only after the arrival of Anu. Anu becomes a frequent visitor to Suman's house this develops a friendship between them. While, Varsha and Hemant spending time at school, Suman, Anu and Vikram's mother, Akka, spend time at home with sharing a cup of tea and the diverse stories. Women's

unities make them to feel the real happiness and find breaks due to the children's arrival from their school. This was not liked by Varsha, because she is over possessive towards Suman. Varsha already affected psychologically by her mother's death and anxiously aspires to keep her new family together. Anu's arrival finds some changes and balances the household of Dharm's family. It becomes increasingly suspicious of Anu's relationship with her stepmother. Varsha's strong interest to keep her family together, which made her maintain secrets that the friendship between Anu and Suman. This may create fissure in the Dharma's family bring definite catastrophe.

Suman's life moved unpleasantly this is observed by her own mother in law. She said "Are you a sheep, are you a brainless ninny, what are you doing standing there like that? Go I say go!" (30). Suddenly Varsha listen these words from her grandmother and asked with a melting voice and the frightened eyes "Mama is going away?". Varsha questioned her grandmother that "Akka are you sending Mama away? Why? I don't want her to leave. She is mine. She is mine. She is mine." (60) She wrapped her arms around Suman's legs and screamed a lot and said that she won't leave her and she will tell Papa. Something stops Varsha and she hides the plan of Suman and her grandmother. Meanwhile, Varsha pulled Suman and stared into her eyes and said "I Love You Mama, please don't leave" (63). She cleverly understood that if she reveals the truth about the plan of Suman to Papa, definitely the family will face the detachment due to Vikram's anger. So Varsha herself takes charge in holding her step mother Suman and hides Suman's passport and makes keen observations in every moves of Suman. Suman had no idea since she had no money, driver's licence and her passport disappeared. She stated "So here I am Stuck in a world full of borders and boundaries, unable to travel because I can't show proof of my identity to the people who guard the entryways and exits ... without that I am nobody other than the wife of a man who is my guardian, my custodian, my prison." (64) Finally she herself revelled that there is no escape for her from this place. Suman created lovely lies to her beloved Appa through letters by stating that she is more happy in big house and lucky to have this life. After the death of her father Madhu Kaki she finds nowhere to run. Badami strongly showcases the cultural and familial bond through Suman which can never be detached from women's life.

Suman came to help Anu with an armload of comforters which Anu badly needs them. Suman's view on winter is terrible and feels like she may die in cold. Suman warns Anu to be careful when she goes out in winter. Even Suman is ready to give torch light to her and always insists to make sure to dress warmly. Suman said that it is not a joke Anu, winter is very cruel. Through Suman's words Badami highlights the climatic condition of Canada which is terrible for Suman but not for Anu.

Varsha's love towards Hem exhibited through the birthday present. She collected some pictures and pasted in one note book secretly. Hem also loves her present a lot, but for making that lovely present Varsha tore her father's book. Unfortunately this was known to her father after looking at her birthday present. Varsha asked sorry to Papa, and apologize by saying that she will never do such bad thing again. She explains to Papa that she wanted to give Hem a special birthday present for that she did it. Papa's heart does not melt after listening to Varsha's voice. He twisted Varsha's arm so hard. Varsha was sure it would crack into half but she did not cry aloud, because she knows definitely this would make Papa madder than now. Varsha again said sorry to Papa, as per Suman's wish she bent down and touched her

Papa's feet, bony feet and feels like to be vomited. Suddenly she heard Papa's sob big tears above her bent head. Finally, he gathered her into his arms and hugged her close. Papa asked Varsha that "Is this the way a good daughter should behave? Hanh?" (96). He suddenly turned towards Suman and snapped her to get some ice for the child's face. Suman asked sorry to Varshi and stated that "What shall I do? Tell me. Is there anything?" (97). Hem said that he hates Papa for bringing such tragic moment into his home. Varsha slapped Suman's hands out of angrier than Papa. Varsha said that "I can take it, Mama, I am not a coward like you and it was my fault anyway mines." Badami spotlights the attitudes of Varsha at a very young age who admits her mistakes and challenges in her life.

Papa's belt releases like snake and it hurts a lot with its leather. Mama started to cry and begged him to leave them alone. Meanwhile, bell rang it was Anu and Papa had to stop in between. Anu asks Suman are you okay? Papa asked Suman why Anu is here, does she come very often? Suman had to answer artificially by stating that "Our business is our business, nobody else's". Mama rushed Hem and Varsha to up stairs and she whispered no noise, no noise. Then they all went to the room and shut the door. After they heard Anu's voice was gone Papa reaches upstairs then they opened the doors. Papa enquired about Anu's arrival. Suman manages herself by stating that "I see hardly her, I think she is busy writing her book"(98). Suman got the promise from Varsha and Hem. She said that if she is not ready to keep up her promise she will go to hell. Through this statement Badami strongly projects the family reputation. If the children say the truth outside people may think bad about them and their family. To avoid that Suman got promise from her children. Nextday, Anu asked about Varsha's puffy and bruised face but Varsha said that she got into fight with a guy at school yesterday. Vashi also strongly adds that she can deal with it and breaks off the conversation by saying that she needs to catch the bus.

One fine day Suman notices Varsha and Hem at far of their backyard and against the tree, revealing out their mind and heart to it. She too wonders what they were whispering to it. Badami presents the title metaphorically which denotes the secrets are well safe and cannot be transformed to others. As a human one can feel light after sharing the secrets to the trees it may look ridiculous but it reduces the real life stress if people believe in it. At the young age, Varsha and Hem believed in it and shared their secrets by telling it to the trees. Suman understands that Hem is hiding something but she can know before Varsha works on him or else it is not possible to find out. Suman realises Anu's words that Varsha's influence on Hem looks unhealthy. Suman's next plan is to separate Hem from Varsha.

Eight dollars in coins placed in a jar and 1,350 dollars in a pouch. Suman hesitated initially and slipped it all in her jacket. She feels ashamed and guilty about her actions but she believes that Anu would have lent it to her. Suman feels happy that Anu had offered her help in a generous manner so she decides nothing harm in taking her things after she is gone. Suman promises herself when she settles into a different life; she will send the money back to her brother's address. Unlike the money, the junk jewellery and single heavy gold bangle have sentimental value so she decided to return to her family because it has some motherly attachment. On the other hand Suman feels bad because she has lost a friend, Anu, along with it Akka too. It's the time for Suman to find her lost herself. After Anu's death the back house is totally empty and the things carried away by her brother. Suman is alone except for Hem, who stayed home by ignoring school with complain of stomach pain. Suman also

thought that Anu's death may affect Hem deeply. Hem wake up and screams at night by stating that there are some ghosts knocking at the windows. Hem is sick and Suman decides that he should not be outside too long. He turns around at the sound and slips madly through the snow which directs him towards the house. Suman opens the door and let him in, He suddenly falls into her arms. "I heard her", he sobs. "I heard her", Suman got confused and asked baby what did you hears? Hem said, "Anu, I heard her just now. Tap-tap, she was tapping on the window" (103).Suman explains that it was me not Anu and she gives him a tight hug and rocks him like a baby.Hem holds Suman tight and sobs even louder.Finally,he says he has a secret a bad secret.

He started to share his secret to Suman that when she and papa went to hospital with Akka.Anu came over to look after them.Both Hem and Varsha turned off all the lights expect there.Anu asked why they were doing switch off.Varsha explains papa doesn't like to waste electricity.Varsha pulled all the curtains and explains that this is the way to make heat stay inside their house.Anu feels uncomforted and leaves it as their own way. She went for a smoke burn she finds hard to hold a cigarette and it seems like no company for her and looks like talking to herself. Meanwhile Varsha turned the key in the door and they ran to kitchen turned lights off and curtains pulled down. We sat in dark and Anu knocking started up as Tap-tap, tap-tap and she went.Varsha invites Hem not to be scared because he is not outside at home. Anu taps the door for a very long time but Varsha and Hem didn't open the door. Hem cries and says that it is so cold outside so it's good to open the door and also to let Anu inside. Hem alarms Varsha by stating that Anu will be eaten by this snow. Hem cried on and on to switch on the lights and also to open the door. Varsha has a perception on Anu, who alerts Suman to leave her home which burdens her a lot. Suman also says the same. Varsha finds the chance to threatened Anu and she feels that Anu has to learn a lesson. Varsha warns Hem to say that they were fast asleep. Hem reveals to mama about the secret of Varshaand how she treated Anuin the past. Anu's notebook simply left on the table. Hem said Varsha should not have it because it belongs to Anu. Varsha simply said that let the finder –keepers so now it was theirs and hides it in a secret place inside her cupboard... Through this Varsha hide the truth to Papa thatAnu is helping Mama run away only with Hem not Varsha. Varsha justifies her actions that if there things hang known to Papa he feels broken hearted and become mad. It may lead Papa worse towards them me tell his Mama, how Anu's ghost bangs every day and night not only in his room window but also all rooms' windows. He cannot sleep because he feels very scary and says that Anu is coming to get him. Hem scared about his sister and Papa. He cried like he needs to away from that place with his mom. He tells his Mama, were Varsha had her passport. He tells everything to Mama and feels bad for betraying Varsha. He decides to go and tell tree what he simple did and he believes that Tree will tell Varsha. Finally, Hem believes human that his sister knows everything which he said about her so far. As a mother Suman finds nothing fault with Hem and it seems hard to believe it. She herself consoles by saying Hem is a baby and too young to resist Varsha. Suman calls Varsha as a terrible girl. Varsha's afraid made her hide Suman's passport it strongly exhibits herfeelings and connection towards Suman. Suman feels Varsha is becoming mad and feels sorry for her. Suman realizes Anu's words; it is right to get out and owes it to her child Hem and to herself. Suman knows it will be difficult one to manage but she makes up her mind and believes it will be a good start for her. Varsha is back from school on that day Hem follows her by holding hands and drags behind for the first time Suman insist Varsha should come back on her own today. Varsha

also accepts it's by stating that she is old enough to bring Hem home. Vikram also accepts the same because he will be in hospital to take care Akka. Doctor says initially days are to be counted and later he said Akka has gone. Hem slightly distant from Varsha and slips by snow towards Varsha. Varsha holds his jacket, hugs him from back and leans from him. Varsha stands alone her coronet has brighten more than winter white. Varsha moves towards giant tree which they love most. Varsha leans against the tree and she places her face close to the back. Suman notices the playfulness of Hem and Varsha. Suman wishes to ask the tree what children were whispering to it and astonished what they burry into its ancient wooden heart. Suman is not about their whisper towards trees and ever want to know. Varsha loaded her conversation to the tree and looks the house. She stuck with the sight of kitchen window. Varsha stands straight at Suman and look at her. Suman warns towards her but Varsha doesn't respond. Once again Suman warns at her in order to pretend that she doesn't know anything. Suman thinks Varsha is capable of doing anything and soon she reaches her home.

Inside the house J.K.Dharma built on a road, that goes nowhere, it is place nobody cares the happening behind the closed doors of a house. It indirectly highlights that the family business is the business of the family. In turns, Varsha also has a secret, she closed the door and switched off the lights she is sure that the passport is not found in a place where Varsha hides it. Hem replies Suman may find it, Hem is a blabber mouth who doesnot keep any secret with him. Now Varsha is sure about the departure of Suman with the missing passport. Varsha deepens her thought that Suman may leave along with Hem who is very close to Varsha. Varsha says Hem is mine because only she saw him first. Varsha worries for Akka's death and feels nobody is for her. Varsha develops the idea that Suman cannot go and she cannot have Hem. Varsha gives importance to Hem than Suman. She assumes herself that she will find a way to keep Suman forever with her and to keep Hem with her.

Varsha is cunning as the snow, sharp as the winter wind and strong as a tree. She can find a way to stop Suman to escape from that place because she is the strong Varsha Dharma who is the step daughter of Suman and sister of Hem. Varsha remains strongly that is her house and her family, so she is for that she should not leave it for any cause. Demond Tutu says that "You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them." Self confidence of Badami's characters (Hem and Varsha) help them learn from their own experiences in life. This learning helps them adapt themselves to various situations. This adaptation is the outcome of all the sufferings of Hem. Hem becomes a role model for the children. It is the only way to lead a peaceful and successful life. Through Hem, Badami highlights the ethical life which is more important to all human beings in-order to attain spirituality. Marcus Aurelius says that "The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts: therefore, guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature." Varsha's mental hit of insecurity makes her do many wrong things out of that she attained unsuccessful life because she is extending more gaps towards spiritual life. Suman would have guided Varsha in a good way by providing more comfort to her. If this happened in Varsha's life definitely she would have not turned as an evil one. Through this Badami strongly insists that parental care, love and affections are also important to mould the children's life not only in their family but also individually.

Works Cited:

Badami, Anita Rau. *Tell it to the Trees*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2012. Print.

https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/desmond_tutu_112366?src=t_family

https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/marcus_aurelius_121534.

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/loss-of-innocence>